



**THE BARD STUDENT CURATED HISTORICAL ELAS EXHIBIT
FRIDAY DECEMBER 1, 2017**

RED HOOK VILLAGE HALL, 5PM

This exhibit is an overview of the development and management of Montgomery Place as a property from its beginnings as primarily a nursery and working farm to a pleasure ground for its elite residents and their peers. Special emphasis in this exhibit is given to the laborers who enabled the estate's business operations, maintained its landscape features, and therefore facilitated the creation of an American antebellum aristocracy.

**Bard
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ELAS, Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences

Montgomery Place (MP) Antebellum Timeline

- 1802 Janet Livingston Montgomery (1743-1828; married 1773-1775), widow of Richard Montgomery (1738-1775), buys 242-acre farm in Red Hook, NY.
- 1804 Nursery business is established.
- 1804/05 MP, first called "Chateau de Montgomery," is built.
- 1805 Edward Livingston, Janet's brother, marries Louise d'Avezac in New Orleans
- 1806 Cora Livingston is born to Edward and Louise in New Orleans.
- 1823 Alexander Gilson, future head gardener, is born a slave at MP.
- 1827 Slavery ends in NYS.
- 1828 Janet Montgomery dies and leaves property to Edward, her brother.
- 1833 Cora Livingston marries Thomas Barton.
- 1835 Estate is now called "Montgomery Place."
- 1840 Gothic conservatory is built by F. Catherwood.
- 1840s Anti-rent wars.
- 1841 Gilson becomes head gardener. Louise and neighbor make a covenant to protect Sawkill ravine.
- 1844/45 A. J. Davis designs additions (south wing, north pavilion, west portico) to house.
- 1845 Cora Barton works with A.J. Downing to design formal gardens near the conservatory.
- 1846 Thomas Barton starts arboretum.
- 1847 A. J. Downing lauds MP in *The Horticulturalist*.
- 1849 H. J. Ehlers provides Barton with design for arboretum.
- 1850 Hudson River Railroad cuts along the river (western) edge of MP.
- 1860 Louise Livingston dies. MP coach house designed by A. J. Davis.

Montgomery Place is known for its scenic beauty—exquisite landscaping, lush gardens, and a vista overlooking the Hudson River. When Edward Livingston inherited the estate from his sister, he relocated to the house with his wife, Louise, and their daughter Cora. From that point until Louise’s death in 1860, Edward and the two women—mother and daughter—transformed the estate into a breathtaking, tasteful landscape—one marked by a Gothic conservatory (demolished in 1880), formal gardens, an arboretum, a coach house, and an expanded, redesigned mansion.

But Chateau de Montgomery, as the property was originally named in 1802, was not a pleasure ground in its beginnings. First conceived and established by Janet Livingston Montgomery (1743-1828), it was a private business—a nursery and working farm. Janet’s sales of crops, ornamental fruits and trees, and real estate provide evidence of this critical entrepreneurial aspect of the estate’s routines. Often overlooked in standard treatments of this property, free and enslaved workers enabled the enterprise by tending the nursery, performing farm labor, and maintaining the house. It was the laborers who permitted the public and conventional presentation of the property as a resplendent showplace of America’s rural elite. The visual allure of Montgomery Place as a pleasure ground was made possible by Janet’s economic pursuits, which continued after her death, and the workers tasked with realizing these goals. By pushing the farm operations of the property to the far edges, the reworked design of the property emphasized its newer, park-like features and the importance of its elite consumers and obscured other essential historical actors. Moreover, the manipulation of the landscape, for both business and aesthetic purposes, stands in contrast to its use by its indigenous occupants.

In all these ways, operations at Montgomery Place shed light on regional and national racial and class hierarchies as well as the aesthetic sensibilities, habits, and material privileges of the nation’s elite from the early national period through the eve of the Civil War. The window from Montgomery Place offers observers a microscopic lens for viewing larger cultural, social, economic, and political patterns during this time frame.

A Place of Business

Janet Livingston Montgomery ran a successful business at her Red Hook estate by capitalizing, not only on the land for farming, but also on the emerging enthusiasm for horticulture in early America. Interest in ornamental fruit trees and plants was fresh and rising in the new nation, and Janet saw this as an opportunity. Wealthy by birth and marriage, she nonetheless decided to develop this industry as an independent income stream after her husband’s death. This was atypical for women of her day. Generally married women exercised a degree of economic decision-making only as “deputy husbands” standing in for their husbands when patriarchy were away from the homestead. As a *feme covert* (literally, a “covered woman”), a married woman looked to her husband who had legal authority to act on behalf of his family. As a widow, however, Janet was considered a *feme sole* (an unmarried woman or, literally, a “woman alone”) invested with legal rights to buy, sell, and own property on her own behalf. She seized the opportunity to create a horticultural hub, and she produced some of the highest quality fruit and vegetable plants in the area. Janet rose above the limitations that society put on her as a woman to become a powerful independent business owner. She had passion and skills for business.

By choosing to start a nursery business, Janet demonstrated the Livingston family’s keen eye for the main chance, first developed during the colonial period and passed on to her by her father. Horticulture became one of the major pastimes of leading Americans and gentleman farmers such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson following the Revolutionary War, and this trend attracted new entrepreneurs willing to pursue the fashion for decorative plantings commercially. The first florist and seed store in New York City was established in 1802 by Grant Thoburn, just as Janet was developing her property. By jumping into a field that was taking off, she displayed great financial acumen. Horticulture was one of the first businesses in which advertising was utilized, usually through newly founded horticulture and farming catalogs. There is reason to believe that Janet employed these marketing methods since customers wrote to her from all over the country, saying she provided the best plants they had ever seen. The desirability of her nursery’s products is attested by a request she received,

displayed in the exhibit, from a Jonathan Wilkes Hyde in Catskill, New York in 1819 “to purchase 1500 grafted apple trees.”

As a businesswoman, Janet Montgomery ran a tight ship. This is seen in a section from an 1806 accounting ledger that details her sales of turnips and in an 1817 foreclosure notice. In the latter, she reclaimed ownership of a property from Bromie Hall and his wife, to whom she personally extended a mortgage loan. When the Halls failed to repay the loan, she took legal action. The exhibit document reads, “[N]otice is hereby given that . . . said mortgaged premises will be exposed to sale at public auction at the Courthouse in the Village of Poughkeepsie on the second day of July one thousand eight hundred and eighteen at ten o’clock in the forenoon of that day and a consequence recorded to the purchaser.” Janet was committed to maintaining a profitable property and to sustaining her capital.

A Workplace for Free Laborers

Beyond feelings of American exceptionalism, the American Revolution unleashed modern ideologies of equality which reached ordinary men and women of the newly liberated nation. These notions clashed with the manorial system, unique to the Hudson River Valley, that was established during the colonial period. Under this semi-feudal arrangement, huge tracts of land were given to a privileged few. Janet Livingston Montgomery’s great-grandfather Robert Livingston (1654-1728), first lord of Livingston Manor, acquired 160,000 acres from the Royal Governor of New York, Thomas Dongan, in 1686 and this land became the source of his descendants’ wealth. Manor lords like Livingston contracted with tenant farmers to develop their lands. Tenants held leases on acreage they were expected to improve by clearing woodlands, constructing buildings, and growing crops. They owed manor lords yearly rent; a quarter of the profits from any sale of the leases; and a certain number of workdays each year, away from their leased lands, on the landlord’s property. The rate of tenant settlement on Livingston land was slower than other properties in the Hudson Valley due to the unusually small plots of land the Livingstons subcontracted-- on average, no more than eighty-four acres per plot-- for an unusually high rent rate. As lessees, tenants occupied farms for generations with little net advancement; they were like serfs and felt like slaves. Once, when tenants on Janet’s father’s Columbia County lands refused to pay the rent for which they were in arrears in the 1750s, violence ensued after Robert Livingston, Jr. sent his employees to burn down one protester’s barn.

Janet Livingston Montgomery owned one hundred acres of property in Delaware County that she leased out to several tenants. She was relatively sensitive to their plight. In 1820, she wrote her brother, Edward, “If my rents were regularly paid, I should not want, but my poor tenants in Delaware have been pretty distressed by the grasshopper, which like Pharaoh’s, have devoured everything they had. Their cattle died by the hundreds and they were reduced to taking the thatching from their barn to feed them, notwithstanding one of my tenants lost twenty-six head. From these it were vain to hope or expect anything.” Still, she exacted workdays on Montgomery Place from these lessees. As the manorial system stood increasingly at odds with democratic notions of property rights and property access in the antebellum years, tenant farmers across the Hudson Valley fought to dismantle the practice. They organized as the Anti-Renter Party and protest organizations like The Children of the American Revolution. The resisters held rallies, as seen in the exhibit’s poster advertising one such event for Independence Day, 1839; physically attacked sheriffs who tried to collect rents or evict tenants; and elected state legislators who opposed the leasehold tenure system. The anti-renter tenants also carried out protests wearing appropriated Native American calico attire and masks adorned with feathers, and wielding bright banners that read “down with the rent.” By 1852, the manorial system faded away as weary proprietors sold their leased farms to land speculators.

A Workplace for Slave Labor

The regular use of African slaves began within two years of the establishment of New York as a colony by the Dutch West India Company in 1624. Since the patroon system of land distribution that granted huge tracts to a few privileged recipients had the effect of discouraging European immigration to New Amsterdam at first, the

company turned to chattel slavery as a source of labor to develop the colony's infrastructure-- to clear forests, to pave roads, to construct docks, and the like. European settlers used slaves as private servants, too. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century as the Hudson River Valley's fur trade declined and colonists turned to more diversified pursuits, large landholders like the Livingstons increasingly relied on slaves as farm hands, domestic servants, and skilled workers. By 1720, New York ranked fourth among the thirteen colonies behind South Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland in black population, the overwhelming majority of which was enslaved. By 1790, New York was the largest slave holding state north of the Chesapeake Bay, and there were 1,856 slaves in Dutchess County. Nearly a quarter of households in Rhinebeck, Poughkeepsie, and Fishkill had slaves who learned and became skilled in many tasks, including agriculture and domestic work. Montgomery Place was one of those households that continued this late eighteenth century pattern into the early nineteenth century, as seen in the exhibit document in which Janet Montgomery purchased a slave and in the iron leg shackles within the estate's collections that are on display. The affidavit shows transfer of ownership to her of a "female Negro slave named Susan, aged about fourteen years" "in consideration of [Janet's payment of] the sum of one hundred dollars."

The freeing of slaves on an individual level was not uncommon, but remained private. This sentiment would not be reflected in public policy until the very end of the eighteenth century when New York State issued its Gradual Manumission Law. This stated that any male slave born after July 4, 1799 would be free in 28 years, and that any female born after July 4, 1799 would be free in 21 years. Montgomery Place was established in 1802, within the midst of this transition. Slaves, aware of this legislative change, began negotiating with their owners and sympathetic whites for early manumission and when, unsuccessful, freed themselves by running away. One such example was 19-year-old Sam, owned by Janet's cousin Gilbert in Poughkeepsie. Sam persuaded Gilbert, a manumissionist, to purchase him for 225 dollars with the understanding that Gilbert would allow him to work out an early freedom by repaying Gilbert this sum, probably from wages earned as a hired-out slave. Anxious to be free, however, Sam escaped his new owner in July of 1804 before fulfilling his part of the bargain, according to the runaway advertisement Gilbert placed in a local newspaper, which is on display. Gilbert offered a "ten dollar reward" (about \$210.00 in 2017) and stated his view that Sam had "ungratefully fled."

After 1827 when chattel slavery ended in New York State, many former bondspeople elected to remain in the employ of their former owners. On Montgomery Place, Alexander Gilson, whose exact year of birth before 1827 is somewhat unclear, was an example. He continued as an employee in the capacity of Head Gardener. He is pictured in a stereoscopic image in the exhibit along with his grave marker. As head gardener and a former slave, Gilson was like James F. Brown (1793-1868), his counterpart further south on another Hudson River estate, Mount Gulian in Fishkill Landing. Historian and Bard Professor Myra Armstead chronicled how gardening became a vehicle of upward mobility for manumitted slaves who mastered the craft. These exceptional individuals connected to the horticultural world of the valley's gentry--the world from which Janet Montgomery's nursery profited-- by their erudition in botany and botanical literature, their practical knowledge of cultivating techniques, their willingness to engage in experimentation, and competing in horticultural shows. The rarified horticultural sphere created an informal social network in the Hudson Valley including servant gardeners that cut across lines of ethnicity, class, gender, and race, all encircling a common interest in flowers, fruit, and plants. In this small way, an opportunity existed at Montgomery Place to somewhat reshape social practices surrounding identity so that that servants and elites approached a somewhat more egalitarian relationship.

A Pleasure Ground: A Place of Elite Formation and Self-Expression

Montgomery Place, owned by a wealthy family, was a venue for the gatherings of others of similar social class. As such, it functioned as a site where members of the region's antebellum aristocracy affirmed their privileged status through public performances before their counterparts and those who served them, and through material displays in personal style, house furnishings, house design, and treatment of the grounds. The elite class demonstrated its standing through dress and manners. Individuals were not expected to dress above their station, so that fashion worked as a clear marker of distinctions in social rank. Cora Livingston Barton's portrait, shown in the exhibit, allows a glimpse into the fashionable hairstyles, fine jewelry, and expensive clothing of women within her class. After the death of her husband, Janet Montgomery received an expensive mourning pendant from one of her

brothers. The pendant was surrounded by small pearls, with a poem of deep sorrow inscribed on the back. Edward Livingston's signet ring, displayed in an exhibit case and used to seal his letters and business correspondence, similarly marked his high rank in society. Manuals of etiquette distilling standards of respectable, polite deportment circulated among this set. The Livingstons at Montgomery Place, like their peers, showcased their cultural capital, education, and sophistication on their estates. For example, the Montgomery Place collection includes a silver oil lantern depicting ancient Egyptian iconography of a pharaoh and two serpents. This item illustrates the Livingstons' knowledge of and participation in Egyptomania, a nineteenth century cultural craze in high society brought about by archaeological discoveries concerning Ancient Egypt. Large and small-scale portraiture lining the mansion's walls was an important feature of elite material culture as well. Large portraits, such as Cora Livingston Barton's, were commissioned for use on the estates, while smaller portraits, such as one of Andrew Jackson in the estate collection, could have been offered as gifts or mementos of special occasions. The portrait of President Jackson was given to Edward Livingston as a gesture of thanks for political support. An indicator of the cultural refinement of the Livingstons is the shared origin of the portraits of Cora and Jackson portraits the family owned--the New Orleans-based, neoclassicist artist Jacques Guillaume Lucien Amans.

Perhaps the most recognized measure of the social position and cultural distinction of the proprietors of Montgomery Place is the physical environment they created on the estate in the years before the Civil War. Aesthetic values, prized in the literature and paintings that circulated among elites, promoted gardens and parks in the English landscape style where the leisure class could experience "the beautiful" and "the picturesque." Edward Livingston and his family transformed the place into an enchanting "Pleasure Ground" that the nation's leading landscape architect, Andrew Jackson Downing, applauded in an 1847 article he wrote for *The Horticulturalist*. A sketch from that piece picturing the conservatory and flower garden can be found in the exhibit.

Rather than blood and inheritance, respectability and socioeconomic achievement are popularly considered the criteria for mobility to high rank and leadership in early America. But the Livingstons had a head start in the colonial era. Benefiting from the tenant system and from institutionalized slavery, their original patriarch, the first Robert Livingston, brilliantly leveraged his political connections in Albany during the late seventeenth century to gain the seed capital in land (once occupied by Native Americans, decimated or dispersed by then) and labor, free and enslaved, that facilitated the accumulation of riches for himself and his progeny. The Livingstons continued to solidify their economic, political, and social standing by shrewd business dealings, by exploiting tenancy and slavery, and by intermarriage into families of like mind and similar resources throughout the eighteenth century. Janet's marriage to Richard exemplifies this pattern. By the time of Montgomery Place's creation in the nineteenth century, blood and inheritance *had* come to work in their favor even as such advantages were increasingly challenged by those who served them and who agitated for a more level and democratic playing field.

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Student Exhibit Curators and Essay¹ Authors

Brian Araque
Stephanie Blanco
John Bonetti
Olive Chen
□Win Cheney
Greer Clarke
Nirobi Coleman
Cheyenne Cutter
Alana De Voe
Isabella Feinstein
Antonio Gansley-Ortiz
Olivia Gibson
Sarah Gichan
MaryJo Inglisa
Olivia Konstam
Virginia Manning
Charles Michie
Jonathan Mildner
Vasia Pemberton
Emma Popkin
Jackson Siegal
Shania Sinclair
Miranda Whitus

¹ This essay was edited by Myra Young Armstead.

